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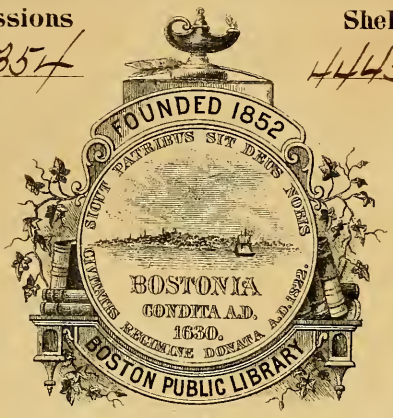

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SERMON

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MRS. MIRIAM PHILLIPS,

CONSORT OF

HIS HONOR WILLIAM PHILLIPS,

DELIVERED

ON THE 18TH OF MAY,

BEING THE SABBATH AFTER THE FUNERAL.

BY BENJAMIN B. WISNER,

PASTOR OF THE OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON.

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SERMON.

PSALM XXXVII, 37.

MARK THE PERFECT MAN! AND BEHOLD THE UPRIGHT! FOR THE END OF THAT MAN IS PEACE.

THE primary design of this passage was to lead us to a correct estimate of the dispensations of God towards the righteous and the wicked. It also furnishes us the most desirable consolation in the death of the truly pious; assuring us that, whatever may have been their lot in the present life, and however acute their sufferings at the approach and in the hour of dissolution, they are now at peace. The instruction which it communicates, is then, you at once perceive, peculiarly appropriate to the present occasion. A much respected and numerous family—most of them members of this religious society, their venerable head the senior officer of this church—with a large circle of friends, and of brethren and sisters in Christ, have recently

been called to mourn. By this afflicting dispensation, God has spoken to each one of us in the voice of warning. That voice it is our duty to regard, our interest to obey. That I may be instrumental in administering consolation to the afflicted and instruction to the warned, I propose—in coincidence with the scheme of thought suggested by the text—to consider in the present discourse,

I. The character, and

II. The end of the righteous.

"Mark the perfect man! and behold the upright! for the end of that man is peace."

I. The terms 'perfect' and 'upright' are not to be considered as indicating distinct and different traits of character, but—in accordance with a mode of speech very common among the Hebrews—as a repetition of the same thought in different but synonymous language, for the purpose of explication or of exciting attention, "Mark the perfect man! behold the upright!" Either of these epithets may therefore be taken as fully expressing the character which the writer intended to exhibit.

What then are we to understand by a perfect man? In what sense do the Scriptures ascribe perfection to men in the present state?

It is not intended, when the Holy Spirit applies this epithet to the pious, that they have from the

commencement of their moral agency perfectly obeyed the law of God. This is evident from the fact, that these same Scriptures assert, with the utmost explicitness, that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." "The whole world is guilty before God."

Neither are we to understand by the application of this epithet to the pious, that they have all or any of them, in the present life, been completely recovered from the sinfulness of their natural state. The law and the gospel, addressing us as accountable agents, possessing full capacity to perform our duty, do indeed require us to be "perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect;" that is, to be completely holy. They can require nothing less than this; unless God will surrender the claims of his moral government, and give us the liberty of obeying him just as far as we please, or rather of not obeying him at all. "With God," we should do well to remember, "there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." His law is perfectly "holy, just, and good." Its demands will neither be dispensed with, nor mitigated. "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than for one tittle of the law to fail." It is therefore the unquestionable duty of every man to "love the Lord his God with all his heart," and render him the uninterrupted service of all his powers.

But the question before us does not respect the duty, but the actual character of men. How is the fact? Do men ever, in this life, attain to sinless perfection—to perfect and entire conformity in heart and life to the requirements of the divine law? This question has been answered by the Holy Ghost, who affirms, that "there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not." In exact coincidence with this statement, we find, in perusing the history of those who are denominated 'perfect' by the sacred writers, that not one of them was entirely free from sin.* And, in every age of the world, it has been a distinguishing characteristic of the pious, that they constantly felt and deeply lamented the existence and influence of "a law in their members warring against the law of their mind:" and the greater their attainments in piety, the more humble have they been under a sense of their deficiencies, and the more abundant their confessions of remaining imperfection. The Apostle John does indeed say, that "whosoever is born of God sinneth not." But he certainly did not mean that every or any Christian is perfectly holy; for in the same Epistle he affirms, that "if we say we have

* See Gen. vi, 9, compared with ix, 20, 21. Job i, 1, 8, compared with ix, 20. 2 Chron. xv, 17, compared with xvi, 1—10. 2 Kings xx, 3, compared with v, 12—19. Jas. iii, 2, second clause, compared with the first clause of the verse.

no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." He simply meant that those who are born of the Spirit do not sin habitually.* Of the fact then, that none of the people of God do actually attain, in this life, to sinless perfection, there can be no reasonable doubt. And hence it is evident, that this is not the perfection ascribed to the pious in the Scriptures.

In what sense then does the Bible pronounce real Christians to be perfect?

In at least one instance, the word seems to be used to express that perfection of righteousness which the believer has in Christ for his justification before God. "Whom," says the Apostle to the Colossians, "we preach; warning every man, and teaching every man, in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."

Generally, however, the term is used with reference, not to the state of the believing sinner as justified before God, but to his character as renew-

* "So," says Dr. McKnight, "should the clause be translated: for the verb in the Greek denotes continued action. Hence it is applied to a tree's producing fruit, Mat. iii, 8, 10, and to a fountain's sending forth water continually, Jas. iii, 12. The meaning therefore is, he doth not work sin as one worketh in a trade or occupation." The expression is the very same as was used by our Lord when he said, "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin," John viii, 34; and by this same Apostle when he affirms, that "He that committeth sin is of the Devil." 1 John iii, 8.

ed into the image of Christ. And its meaning is, that those, to whom it is applied, SINCERELY DESIGN AND HABITUALLY ENDEAVOUR TO OBEY THE WHOLE LAW OF GOD;—are continually striving to attain "to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Thus it is explained by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Philippians. "Brethren," says he, "I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do; forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us, therefore, as many as be *perfect*, be thus minded." He did not pretend to have attained to complete and unsullied holiness. But he was continually pressing toward this mark. He was therefore to be numbered with those who, in the gospel sense, are perfect.

This perfection belongs to every real Christian: or rather, to all who have evidence of being such. They desire to be completely holy. This desire has formed itself into a settled purpose to pursue, and this purpose produces a constant and vigorous endeavour to attain, its object. The perfect and upright man indulges in no known sin; he is watchful over every remaining propensity to sin; diligent in the cultivation of all the graces of the

Spirit; and strives to be faithful in the performance of every known duty. His obedience, though not complete and uninterrupted, is, in its principle, universal.

1. Having been "bought with" an inestimable "price," he aims to "glorify God in his body and in his spirit, which are God's."

He "suffers not sin to reign in his mortal body, that he should obey it in the lusts thereof;" but endeavours to "yield every member an instrument of righteousness unto God."

Equally, and even more, solicitous is he respecting the frame of his spirit; striving to have "every thought" and feeling "brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ." The heart is the life and soul of all evangelical obedience. To this therefore, God in his commands, and the saint in his endeavours, have a principal regard. Constant watchfulness over the state of his heart is one of the distinctive traits in the character of the real Christian. The hypocrite is seeking "the praise of men;" and hence his chief attention is directed to his outward conduct. But the believer seeks the approbation of God; who, he remembers, "looketh on the heart." This fountain of life he therefore endeavours to "keep with all diligence." This is indeed a secret and noiseless, but it is a great and

difficult work:—a work which frequently causes him who is engaged in it to "know a bitterness," which none beside can know; and which often produces a "joy with which a stranger intermeddleth not." The Christian regards all his mental endowments, as well as his property and his bodily powers, as talents committed to him by his Lord: and he endeavours to consecrate them to the glory of the giver. "This sacred employment," says one, "engages his every faculty: furnishes his invention with a pleasing labour, renews his memory to a sweet recollection, exercises his judgment in pious deliberation, and kindles his affections into a holy rapture."

Thus he strives to be "wholly sanctified, in spirit and soul and body;"—to "present HIMSELF a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God."

2. The obedience of the perfect man is also universal as to its object. He aims at conformity to the whole will of God. His duties to his fellowmen he learns, not from the maxims and customs of the world, but from the unerring standard of divine revelation; and endeavours faithfully to perform them from a supreme regard to the will of his Maker, who has commanded him to "love his neighbour as himself." The moralist of this world

overlooks his relations to the moral Governor of the universe, and attends only to those duties which interest and public opinion have derived from the relations of society. But the Christian regards it as "the first and great commandment, to love the Lord his God with all his heart;" and, like his Saviour, esteems persevering impenitence and unbelief as more aggravated sins than the immoralities of Tyre and Sidon, or the licentiousness of Sodom and Gomorrah.* In a word, he feels that every thought and affection, every word and deed, is a subject of the divine requirement; and goes to make up his character in the sight of God. He therefore "sets the Lord always before him." His controlling reflection, in society and in solitude, "in the house and by the way," is, "Thou, God, seest me!" And "whether he eats, or drinks, or whatsoever he does," he strives to "do all to the glory of God."

Such is the character of the perfect and upright man. He is renewed after the image of the Holy One; and walks in "the path of the just, which, like the dawning light, shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

II. We come now, in the second place, to contemplate the end of the perfect man. "The end of that man is peace."

* See Mat. xi. 20—24. and Luke x. 13—15.

We are not to infer, from this mode of expression, that the believer finds no enjoyment in religion till the close of life. "The *ways* of wisdom are pleasantness, and all her *paths* are peace." Whatever be the outward circumstances of the righteous man, when his faith is in exercise, a sacred tranquillity, even amidst the severest trials, possesses and cheers his soul: "in believing" he always finds "joy and peace." His spiritual vision, however, is sometimes obscured; faith frequently falters, and perhaps, for a season, nearly fails: so that his religious enjoyments are often interrupted, and seldom unmixed with sorrow. But at death he shall attain to perfect peace. Not that unmingled serenity and joy are invariably the attendants of a believer's dying hour. He may be cut down by a mysterious providence without an intimation of his approaching change. He may be stupified by disease, or racked with pain, or deprived of reason. Yea, even the pious, and the eminently pious, may die, and in some instances have died, in great dejection of mind, and in fearful anxiety respecting their future destiny. The tempter may be permitted to assail them, and urge his onsets with redoubled fury, "because he knoweth that he hath but a short time." That face which was hid from their Lord in this trying hour may also be hid from

them. But we are not, on this account, to doubt whether their end was glorious. The sun which has rolled through the heavens in brightest splendour, may meet a cloud in the horizon, and set with eclipsed beams. Such instances, however, are rare. And were they more frequent, they would furnish no valid objection to the truth of the position, in reference to every believer, that "the end of that man is peace."

1. Every real Christian is in A STATE of peace and reconciliation with God. Sin has made a fearful controversy between God and man. It has placed us in the attitude of rebels against the divine government; and God in that of an offended Sovereign, who must, if he regards his own glory and the welfare of his kingdom, manifest his displeasure against our sins. "The carnal mind is enmity against God; it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." "They that are in the flesh cannot please God." He "is angry with the wicked every day." This, the Scriptures assure us, is the condition, (whether he knows it or not,) of every unregenerate sinner. This will be the unchanging condition of all who die impenitent, who will then realize it in all its horrors. But in every believer this enmity has been slain. He is reconciled to his Sovereign, and his Sovereign is recon-

ciled to him. Every one that believeth, the Scriptures inform us, is justified before God: and "being justified by faith, they have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Whatever be his present situation,—whether rejoicing in the light of the Divine countenance, or mourning the hiding of his Father's face, and dreading an eternal banishment from his blissful presence,—Jehovah is his friend, and has pledged every attribute that supports his throne to give him the victory over all his enemies, and confer upon him the crown of life; to make his very "afflictions, which are but for a moment, work for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

2. The dying Christian often enjoys a SENSE of his peace with God. When, with intellect unclouded, and faith unwavering, he meets the king of terrors, he meets him with composure, if not with triumph. Death is, to him, a vanquished enemy: for "the sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law;" but, for him, the Saviour has answered the demands of the law, and thus broken the strength of sin and extracted the sting of death,—"God hath given him the victory through Jesus Christ his Lord." "Looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of his faith," he receives the fulfilment of that gracious promise, "When thou passest through

the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burnt, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." His sins have indeed been numerous and highly aggravated, —he feels that they are so: but his faith rests upon "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." He is sensible that his "righteousnesses are as filthy rags:" but he expects to stand before his Judge in the white and perfect robe of "the righteousness, which is of God through the faith of Christ." He is conscious of much remaining depravity,—that he is far from being meet for the society and employments of heaven: but he knows that his Saviour will complete the work of purification where it is begun, and "present" them that love him "faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy." With such views and feelings the soul must be at peace. "My confidence," said a dying saint to him who now addresses you, "my confidence is in Christ; he will not disappoint my hope. My situation in life has been every thing that I could desire. My worldly prospects, should I live, are unclouded. I love my husband and my children; I delight in contributing to their comfort. But I can leave them. I commit them to my covenant God. I desire to depart and be with Christ.

Then I shall be free from sin, and never, never more dishonour my Saviour. O the happiness of being completely holy! of being near and like my God!" Death was rapidly disenthralling her from her tabernacle of clay. Her tranquil eye grew dim: her trembling lip was colourless. In accents scarcely audible, she whispered, "Lord Jesus, receive my"——. And, before she had completed the prayer, her petition was granted, and her soul at rest in the embrace of her Lord.

3. Believers, after death, go into PERFECT AND EVERLASTING PEACE. "The end of those," saith the Scripture, "who have their fruit unto holiness, is everlasting life." Could we but follow the departed spirit, as it wings its way from "the valley of the shadow of death" to the realms of perfect and unchanging light, oh! how rapturous the glories that would burst upon our view! Think of the dazzling, the unfading splendours of that crown of righteousness which is immediately put upon his head!—the transports of the full vision of Christ, sitting "at the right hand of power," and smiling welcome to this trophy of his victorious grace!—the unutterable joy of beholding and admiring the glory of God, as it beams in infinite splendour from the midst of his throne! Now the soul, the IMMORTAL soul, is SATISFIED. There it is at peace

from the risings and the conflicts of inward corruption, and shall never again complain of that "body of death," which has hitherto marred its spiritual enjoyment:—it is at peace from the assaults of temptation; for there is no serpent in the heavenly paradise, no forbidden tree in that garden of unfailing delight:—it is at peace from affliction and trouble; for "sorrow and sighing have fled away," the hand of God "hath wiped all tears from" its raptured "eye." There every power finds complete and unceasing enjoyment,—the soul is filled with unmingled and ever increasing satisfaction in admiring the character and celebrating the praises of a reigning and redeeming God.

But who can describe the future happiness of those "that die in the Lord?" "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." They have perfect and uninterrupted peace in the bosom of God.

Such is the end of "the perfect and upright;" and such we believe was the end of that servant of Christ whose loss we are called to mourn. We believe it, because we have evidence that she possessed the character we have described: and God hath said that "the end" of such an one "is peace."

Blessed with pious and faithful parents, she was, from a child, instructed in the things of God, and always felt the highest respect for vital religion.* The happy and triumphant death of her mother—a lady of devoted and exemplary piety—appears to have been the means employed by the Holy Spirit to bring her to the saving knowledge of Christ. She made a public profession of her faith, and was admitted to the communion of this Church when about twenty years of age;† and, during half a century, was enabled to give evidence of the reality of her piety by a life and conversation becoming the gospel.

Her mental endowments were of a superior order. Though lively and ardent in her disposition, she was distinguished by soundness of judgment and firmness of purpose. Her religious opinions she did not receive upon trust: she studied the Scriptures herself, with diligence, candor, and prayer. The result was a deep and growing conviction of the truth of the religious sentiments in which she had been educated. She adopted

*Mrs. Phillips was born June 16, 1754, N. S. Her father, Hon. Jonathan Mason, (who was born May 16th, 1725, O. S. died May 5th, 1798,) was for many years a Deacon of the Old South Church in Boston. She was married on the 13th of Sept. 1774, to His Honor William Phillips, the present senior Deacon of the Old South Church.

†On the 19th of June 1774.

and loved that system of faith which numbers among its fundamental doctrines the essential Divinity of the Saviour, the entire depravity of human nature, justification by faith alone through the merits of Christ, and renovation and sanctification by the sovereign agency of the Holy Spirit. Her belief of these doctrines was constantly strengthened by her observation of mankind, increasing knowledge of her own heart, and daily experience of their efficacy in producing peace of mind and holiness of life. She felt that it was safe to stake upon their truth her everlasting all. They were not with her, as with too many, mere speculative opinions, but settled and active practical principles. All who were favoured with hearing her religious conversation and her prayers, know how elevated were her views of the divine purity, how deep her sense of her own sinfulness, how entire and confiding her dependence on the merits and grace of her Redeemer. Her life was truly a life of prayer. She delighted in retirement, and in the social devotions of that band of holy women with whom she was associated, many of whom had gone before, and others are following her to glory. The sabbath and the services of the sanctuary were her delight. Often have I heard her dwell with holy gratitude upon the privileges and

benefits, and lament with holy solicitude the profanations, of this sacred day.

The practical influence of her religion was not, however, confined to the closet and the circle of intimate friendship; it was seen in every department of life. The duties of her domestic and social relations she discharged, with affectionate fidelity, from a supreme regard to the will of God; striving in all things to glorify his name. Her friendships were sincere, and faithful, and abiding. She was ever ready to counsel and advise her friends with christian kindness and judgment. When satisfied that it was her duty to administer reproof, she did it, with promptness and fidelity, but with tenderness and affection. When she had ascertained her duty on any subject, she was not to be deterred from performing it by an apprehension of unpleasant consequences. Duty she felt was hers; consequences she could leave with God. While she maintained the honors of the station in which Providence had placed her, with a dignity that commanded universal respect, and regarded the forms of society with becoming attention, she felt the increased obligation imposed on her by her situation in life to "let her light shine before men," and to employ her influence and her substance in doing good. Her charities are known

to have been great: but their amount will not be known till the day of final account. Many are the sons and daughters of affliction that have been comforted and relieved by her bounties, who are still ignorant of the hand that bestowed them.

But her benevolence was too pure to spend itself in merely contributing pecuniary aid for the relief of the wretched. She was a ready visitor to the sick and the unfortunate; and well did she know how to pour into the wounded spirit the oil of consolation, and direct the eye of faith to the merciful hand that was administering the correction. The humble poor she delighted to visit, and relieve, and bless.

She rejoiced in the rising prospects of Zion; and was particularly and deeply interested in the present attention to religion in this and some other congregations in the city. She dwelt much, when conversing on this subject, on the importance of PROFESSORS HONORING THEIR RELIGION at such a time, that their prayers might not be hindered, and that the world might see that there was indeed a revival of the work of God.

In short, it was her ardent desire and her constant aim to "adorn the doctrine of God her Saviour in all things:"—"to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward

men." She deeply felt and often inculcated the importance of a holy life. "We must LIVE RELIGION," she would frequently say, "or we can have no evidence that our faith is genuine, nor leave behind us any satisfactory proof that we have died in the Lord."

Such was her life. Who then can question?—none, I am confident, who knew her will doubt—that in the eye of heaven, she was numbered among "the perfect and upright;" and that her end was "peace."

The disease, with which she was afflicted, was of such a nature that it produced a constant heaviness and stupor: so that very little escaped her, during her illness, respecting her views and feelings in relation to her approaching change. There is evidence, however, that she supposed death to be near, and that she anticipated its arrival with pious resignation and hope. In the morning of the day on which she died, she said, with difficulty, to one of the family who had just come in and asked her if she knew her—"It is a great thing to die." It was replied—"Yes; but you have chosen Jesus for your portion, and he will sustain." Her countenance indicated her assent to this remark; while, with great difficulty, she uttered the word "ROCK:" meaning, no doubt "He is my rock,"

—an allusion she frequently employed in religious conversation with much feeling. This was the last word she uttered. And what could she have said more satisfactory? Her life proved that she had built upon the rock Christ Jesus; and, we are permitted to know, that at the approach of death, she felt that her foundation could not be moved.

From the time just alluded to, she rapidly failed; till, at half past three o'clock on Wednesday the 7th inst. her spirit was released from its earthly tabernacle, and entered upon the rest and peace that remain for the people of God.

Her mourning family have sustained a great—an irreparable loss. But their loss has been her unspeakable gain. It may,—if rightly improved, it will—prove their gain. Better consolation in the death of a friend could not be enjoyed. Our confidence is that she lived the life, and therefore died the death of the perfect and upright, and is now enjoying her eternal reward. May you, my bereaved and afflicted friends, be sustained and comforted in your trial by the promises and grace of that covenant in which she trusted, and found to be "ordered in all things and sure." May her affectionate and faithful counsels be engraven on your hearts: her bright and steady example copied out, in all the harmony and beauty of its proportions,

in your lives: that, like her's, your memory may be blessed, and your reward eternal in the heavens!

This Church has lost one of its brighest ornaments,—this religious society one of its firmest and most devoted friends. "A mother in our Israel has fallen; or rather, I should say, has RISEN; borne, not in a chariot of fire, but on seraph's wings, to the mansions prepared for her in the skies. But where, O! where, is her falling mantle? God, of his mercy, grant that it may fall and rest upon each of us!"*—that this mournful providence may excite us to follow the example of our departed friend, as far as she followed Christ, and to live, as we trust she lived, to the glory of God.

To every person in this assembly God has addressed a solemn warning. Who is there here that does not wish to die as we believe Mrs. Phillips died? You must then live as she lived. You must repent of your sins and believe in Christ with that faith which works by love, purifies the heart, and overcomes the world. And He, in whose hand your breath is, tells you, in language not to be misunderstood, that if you ever intend to make preparation for death, you must make it NOW. Within one week four have been summoned from this Congregation to the eternal world: two with a

* Sermon on the death of Mrs. Waters, by Rev. Joshua Huntington.

warning of but three days, and two without a moment's warning. Fellow-sinner, why were not you of this number? Had you been, what would now be your condition? Is it not possible that the angel of death is commissioned to bear the next summons to you? Are you then prepared to die? What if "the trump of God" were now to sound, "the elements to melt with fervent heat, and the dead, small and great, to stand before God!"—What if these dread realities were this moment to burst upon you! What, O ye who are yet in your sins, would be the sentence you would receive from the lips of the Judge? What could it be but—"Depart into everlasting fire?" And how soon, how very soon, may all this be reality to you? Disease or accident, in any of their thousand forms, may, in a moment, arrest your thoughtless career; and your destiny is fixed forever, you have entered upon the retributions of eternity! My dear hearers, be not deceived. It is true that "NOW is your accepted time and your day of salvation,"—the only opportunity, of which you can be sure, for obtaining the salvation of those precious and immortal souls. See to it then that you be prepared immediately to meet your God. "TO-DAY, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

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